

Alfredo Cortina: An Atlas for Elizabeth

Opening Reception: Friday May 11, 6-9 pm

Exhibition runs through June 16, 2018

Gallery Hours: Tuesday to Saturday 11-6 pm

Curated by Vasco Szinetar

Henrique Faria Fine Art and the Urban Photography Archive (Archivo Fotografía Urbana) are pleased to present *An Atlas for Elizabeth*, the first exhibition of photographs by the Venezuelan Alfredo Cortina to be shown in the United States. This group of photographs was first exhibited in the 30th Bienal de São Paulo (2012), curated by Vasco Szinetar, and later in an exhibition of recent acquisitions by the Museum of Modern Art, New York at the Grand Palais, Paris (2014) and at the Sala Mendoza, Caracas (2015); and most recently at La Fábrica, Madrid (2017).

As curator and art historian, Luis Pérez-Oramas, explains in the exhibition's catalogue essay, "What we should know, in order to begin looking at Alfredo Cortina's work, is that for many years, without considering himself to be a "photographer" other than in complicity with his life partner, the great poet Elizabeth Schön, he systematically and continuously recorded her figure in every imaginable situation where she could be fixed through the silver salts capturing light in an image." Cortina's indexical treatment of Schön and the capturing of her movement through life serve to elevate these encapsulated moments, which range from glamorous, to mysterious, to ordinary, through their crispness of detail and the fact that, in most frames, Schön is the only figure present. This unwavering dedication to the portrayal of this singular woman has resulted in an archive of sorts, in what Pérez-Oramas has called *An Atlas for Elizabeth*.

When perusing the photographs, questions about the constant presence of the woman keep recurring. "Who is she?" Pérez-Oramas asks, "nobody tells us and nothing in the image[s] suggests it." We know from external, biographical sources that Schön was a poet and a permanent fixture in the avant-garde intellectual circles of Venezuela where she and Cortina met, but in these photographs she has been separated from the elements of her personal background and therefore exudes a sense of solitude amidst her surroundings that amplifies an aura of anonymity. Her relationship to the camera (and by extension, the viewer) heightens this effect, in that in most of the photographs her view is away from the photographer and out into the distance, such as in *Camino a Carayaca* (1953), *Higuerote* (1955) or *Hotel San Juan de los Morros* (1966), and the instances where she is looking towards the camera, including *Concha Acústica de Bello Monte* (1954) and *Ortiz* (1955), her physical distance from it is too great for her gaze to establish any kind of relationship with the viewer. These details beget more questions from Pérez-Oramas, "What use is a portrait at such remove as to cause the subject's facial features and corporeal personality to fade away in the distance? Why did Alfredo Cortina, with a systematic effort unprecedented in the history of our images, go to the trouble of avoiding her portrait? Excluding the portrait, what did he want to include?" These questions draw the viewer in further, eliciting intrigue and beckoning.

Through this beckoning, we enter the landscape and find ourselves absorbed into a place that is outside of the bounds of time. We are by a fresh water stream, gazing into a shop window in Caracas, surveying the construction of a house in the countryside, standing on the wide sidewalk of a frenetic New York City—but in the stillness of the delineated environment, this is a passive activity. Pérez-Oramas writes, "there is neither event nor modal circumstance nor action in the portrait [...]. The portrait is *a-modal*: it is not she going or coming, it is not she doing or not doing, it is not she on this or that moment or day; it is she, plain and simple." In this way, in the photographs of Cortina, the presence of Schön ultimately displaces the passage of time, leaving only the presence of the body in the landscape, leaving only the body in the present and in the possibilities that the future holds.

Alfredo Cortina (Valencia (Edo. Carabobo), Venezuela 1903 – Caracas, 1988) is a photographer practically unknown in the universe of contemporary art, including in Venezuela. He is known for his support in the foundation and advancement of broadcasting networks and the modernization of the radio in Venezuela. As a radio and television director, he wrote radio dramas, cultural programs, adaptations of children's stories, soap operas and fictional television series, and even theatrical dramas and comedies. For much of his life he was part of a group of Venezuelan intellectuals and avant-garde artists, which included his wife, the poet and dramatist Elizabeth Schön, the sisters Ida and Elsa Gramcko (a poet and artist, respectively), Carlos Puche (pioneer of modern photography in Venezuela), and the philosopher Ernesto Mayz Vallenilla. Beyond his work for radio and television, Cortina was intensely dedicated to photography, capturing landscapes and sites around a pre-modern, as well as a changing, Caracas, as well as unusual still life compositions, *mise en scènes* and the reconstruction of strange characters. Among his writings, his books *Caracas, la ciudad que se nos fue* (*Caracas, the City that Left Us*, 1976) and *Historia de la Radio en Venezuela* (*The History of Radio in Venezuela*), published by Fundarte after his death in 1995, are the most well known. In 2008, the Urban Photography Archive (Archivo Fotografía Urbana) acquired his entire archive. In 2012, the curator Vasco Szinetar presented an exhibition of his photographic work, until that point completely unknown, at the 30th Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil. His work was shown in 2014 in an exhibition of recent acquisitions by the Museum of Modern Art, New York at the Grand Palais, Paris. In 2015, the exhibition *Alfredo Cortina. Photographs* was presented at the Sala Mendoza and at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo del Zulia in Maracaibo, Venezuela, again curated by Vasco Szinetar; and most recently at La Fábrica, Madrid (2017).

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